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New York

President:	Mr. Meza-Cuadra	(Peru)
Members:	Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Mr. Inchauste Jordán
	China	Mr. Ma Zhaoxu
	Côte d'Ivoire	Mr. Dah
	Equatorial Guinea	Mr. Ndong Mba
	Ethiopia	Mr. Woldegerima
	France	Mr. Delattre
	Kazakhstan	Mr. Tumysh
	Kuwait	Mr. Almunayekh
	Netherlands	Mrs. Gregoire Van Haaren
	Poland	Mr. Radomski
	Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
	Sweden	Mr. Orrenius Skau
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Ms. Pierce
	United States of America	Ms. Eckels-Currie

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

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The meeting was called to order at 4.50 p.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to participate in this meeting.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, to participate in this meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I give the floor to Mr. Lowcock.

Mr. Lowcock: Since the adoption of resolution 2401 (2018), the Secretary-General has on many occasions called for its full implementation. However, rather than implement the resolution of the Council, we have seen parties to the conflict sustain intense military activity at an enormous human cost. Today, we have been asked to provide an update on the humanitarian situation in Raqqa and Rukban. We have also been asked to cover humanitarian issues in Syria at large, in particular in Ghouta, Idlib and Afrin.

Let me start with Raqqa city and Rukban. The population of those two places total only about 1 per cent of the number of Syrians in need of humanitarian help, but their needs are no less important than those of the 99 per cent of their compatriots needing assistance in other parts of the country.

On 1 April, the United Nations undertook an assessment mission to Raqqa. Since the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant was forced out of Raqqa in October, nearly 100,000 people have returned to Raqqa city. However, conditions are not conducive to returns, due to the high levels of unexploded ordnance and improvised explosive device contamination, widespread and severe infrastructural damage, and a lack of basic services. More than 50 casualties of remnants of war have been reported every week. With the onset of spring, we are concerned that children playing outside will be particularly vulnerable. An estimated 70 to 80 per cent of all buildings inside Raqqa city have been destroyed or damaged.

While public services are slowly resuming — with at least 37 bakeries operating, for example — the city lacks electricity and mobile communications, and water is being pumped at only a very limited capacity to the outskirts of the city. As many as 95 per cent of households that have returned to Raqqa are food insecure. Health services are lacking or severely limited. Some schools have reopened, although they are lacking school materials and other supplies. Following the 1 April assessment, United Nations agencies are planning deliveries of humanitarian assistance and programmatic interventions. This response will support the ongoing activities of the humanitarian organizations already active inside Raqqa that are providing food, health care and other basic services. It will also complement the ongoing response for those displaced and in need across north-eastern Syria, where nearly 900,000 people are receiving assistance each month.

In Rukban, some 50,000 people continue to be in need of sustained humanitarian assistance. Water and basic health care are being provided from Jordan, but there is a pressing need for better service provision and, in some cases, for referrals elsewhere for medical help. People in that area last received assistance, delivered from Jordan, in early January. Approval for a United Nations inter-agency convoy from Damascus to Rukban was received from the Government of Syria on 18 March. Humanitarian agencies are working closely with the United States, the Russian Federation and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent to make this delivery possible, noting the importance of finalizing arrangements for the safety of the operation, since the current security guarantees permit movement only to an area some 10 kilometres outside Rukban. Discussions continue on how aid can be best delivered, providing safe delivery of life-saving help to those in need.

The town of Douma and other areas in eastern Ghouta are now under the control of the Government of Syria. After years of deprivation under siege, those who remain in the area still require urgent assistance that we, as the humanitarian community, have yet to be able to provide. Access to reach people throughout eastern Ghouta is critical. The United Nations and partners are responding to the mounting humanitarian needs of the 155,000 people displaced from eastern Ghouta with food, shelter, health care and other assistance and protection services.

However, for those in the overcrowded sites for internally displaced persons around eastern Ghouta, as well as for those who left on buses for Idlib and Aleppo governorates, the situation is precarious. Of the 155,000 who have been displaced, about 63,000 have moved north to Idlib and Aleppo, joining the nearly 400,000 people who have been displaced from southern Idlib since 15 December. As a result, there has been a 25 per cent increase in Idlib's displaced population, with 1.2 million of the governorate's 2 million people now displaced, many of them multiple times. This extreme situation puts incredible pressure on the host communities and the humanitarian actors working cross-border to provide assistance and services. Fighting among non-State armed opposition groups in Idlib is further complicating the situation for those in need in the area. Those remaining in Afrin, as well as the 137,000 people who were displaced to Government-controlled Tell Rifaat and the surrounding areas, are also in dire need of humanitarian aid and must be granted freedom of movement. This includes those who need medical evacuation from Tell Rifaat to nearby Aleppo.

Between 2 and 4 April, several Turkish-facilitated United Nations cross-border shipments consisting of food supplies, health and other relief items were sent to assist people in need in Afrin district. On 25 March, the United Nations and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent delivered assistance to 50,000 people in need in Tell Rifaat. Overall, while these are positive developments, humanitarian partners are still struggling to gain sustained access to Afrin, and freedom of movement for internally displaced persons remains very limited. On 25 March the United Nations also submitted a request to the Syrian authorities for the deployment of an inter-agency surge team to scale up the United Nations operational capacity in Syria. Response to a request for an additional 17 United Nations staff to be deployed for a four-week period was received on 11 April, authorizing the deployment of 12 United Nations staff.

As we approach the conference to be held in Brussels on 24 and 25 April, we have an immediate opportunity to make progress on easing the humanitarian suffering by ensuring that the humanitarian operations are fully funded. With an appeal that is currently less than 15 per cent funded, I cannot overstate the importance of sustaining and scaling up the international response.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank Mr. Lowcock for his informative briefing.

I now give the floor to those Council members who wish to make statements.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank Mr. Lowcock for his briefing.

Various delegations have been constantly calling on us to report to the Council on the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018). Let me oblige. In the context of the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018), Russia, in coordination with the Government of Syria, has undertaken unprecedented efforts to improve the situation in eastern Ghouta, where illegal armed groups, with external support, have held the civilian population hostage for several years. After lengthy and intensive negotiations, those militants who are unreconciled have been evacuated from the area and bloodshed has been prevented. The process of returning the evacuated population is under way, and some 60,000 people have already returned.

On the whole, the situation in eastern Ghouta is stable. In order to maintain law and order, prevent provocations, protect civilians and provide them with humanitarian and medical aid, joint efforts have been organized between Russian military-police units and Syrian law-enforcement bodies. Issues related to the restoration of infrastructure in the towns of eastern Ghouta are being discussed. Rubble is being cleared in Douma with the help of construction equipment provided by Russia. Water and electricity supplies are being re-established. Daily bread deliveries have started. Rebuilding eastern Ghouta will require focused cooperation on the part of the international community, including through the United Nations and its specialized agencies. We call on our colleagues to join these efforts.

However, the situation in Raqqa is disastrous. The coalition expelled the terrorists of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant more than six months ago and has occupied the territory since then, practically speaking. It has done nothing to restore the city, which was destroyed by aerial bombing. People are returning at their own peril and risk and are frequently being blown up by mines and improvised explosive devices.

Nobody really knew what was going on in Raqqa. Until very recently, no efforts had been made even to have the United Nations assess the population's humanitarian needs. Only recently, thanks to our persistent pressure, has one such mission, albeit a very short one, taken place. Even in the space of a

few hours, however, the specialists were able to see with their own eyes that Raqqa lies in ruins. There is literally not a single whole building standing. There are still piles of bodies under the rubble. People are being blown up by mines every day. There is no electricity, water or basic social services. Not a single school or hospital is functioning. The so-called local council, contrary to the coalition's assurances, began work only this month, and it has become clear, and not just to us, that they are totally incompetent. Where did they get these impostors? Whom do they represent? How can they be entrusted with people's lives and safety? As we understand it, there have already been several protests against the American occupation, which has done the residents no good. The only effective way out of the situation in Raqqa will be to restore the functioning of Government structures there.

Another grey area is the Rukban displaced persons camp, which is near the United States military base at Al-Tanf. It is important to say once again that the mere fact of its existence is a gross violation of Syrian sovereignty. It is a continuing cause of concern for Syria's neighbours in Jordan. The coalition forces blocked access to the area for a long period of time, and it took a great deal of effort to get them to issue an official permit with security guarantees. The Syrian authorities gave the green light immediately after that, but so far we have seen no practical steps to provide humanitarian assistance.

The situation in Raqqa and Rukban should be constantly monitored by United Nations humanitarian personnel. It is vital that sustainable access be provided to them. Now we have a question for the coalition countries. What are they doing to implement resolution 2401 (2018)? What are they doing to ease the situation in Raqqa, Rukban and besieged Fo'ah and Kafraya? And they need not bother taking the discussion to a so-called broader format. They should have the courage to answer our questions and not try to change the subject.

However, I do now have a few words to say in a broader context. We have been quite startled by the hypocritical behaviour of the United States, Britain and France in the past few days. Less than a day after the missile attacks, their organizers started coming up with peculiar political initiatives, despite the fact that every element in their proposals was already present in the existing relevant resolutions, which simply had to be implemented. Through their act of aggression, the troika of the United States, Britain and France and those who supported or welcomed their actions declared their solidarity with one party to the conflict. An aggressor does not have the moral right to create international legal documents regarding the victim of that aggression. Russia is working with every side in the Syrian conflict. Our position has always been based on the importance of implementing resolution 2254 (2015) and returning to the Geneva talks, without preconditions, and above all without making them conditional on so-called regime change.

Before the missile attacks, we could see that the Syrian Government was ready to hold talks in Geneva. Now those efforts have suffered a major setback. It is hard to imagine that after all that has happened, the Syrian authorities are enthusiastic about talking about a political settlement in their country on the Western troika's orders. If the aim is to bomb the President of Syria into sitting down at the negotiating table, present that as a victory over him — because according to them he understands only force — and through those negotiations to remove him and put him on trial as a so-called war criminal — as Washington, London and Paris have directly threatened — then the aim is unachievable. They should have no illusions. First they have to repair the damage that they themselves have done to the prospects for a political settlement.

However, the Western capitals are encouraging bellicose pronouncements by the radical opposition, which has set up Al-Assad's departure as a precondition for its participation in the Geneva consultations, and now, inspired by the 14 April missile strikes, is demanding that the coalition start a war with Damascus in direct repudiation of the principles of resolution 2254 (2015). What is needed is for the so-called Riyadh opposition to abandon its destructive position and begin to implement the Security Council resolution, which it has already drifted far away from. And their sponsors should also drop their belligerent rhetoric about the lawfully elected President of Syria, since they themselves insist on the importance of rejecting preconditions.

The idea of creating a mechanism to establish who is responsible for the use of chemical weapons no longer makes any sense when Washington and its allies have already identified the perpetrators and, essentially, appointed themselves their executioners.

Apparently the impression has been created that — encouraged by the Western troika's oh-so-encouraging air strikes and the new lot of sanctions

that Washington has promised us — Russia will have to change its position. It is time that the West understood that this logic has never worked in the past with regard to Russia and will not work in the future either. The British and French delegations hastened to set up plans for Syria a few days ago. We too have a plan. We do not claim it to be exhaustive, but permit me to acquaint the Council with it.

First, there can be no military solution to the Syrian conflict. We are all familiar with the political basis for a settlement. We must work together to implement resolution 2254 (2015), which the negotiations in the framework of the Astana process and the results of the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi are designed to assist. We urge the United States and its allies to end their aggressive actions and threats to use force against the sovereign State of Syria, in violation of the Charter of the United Nations and international law. They serve only to make the prospects for peace more distant.

Secondly, we urge them to halt all efforts to create new realities in Syria, undermining its sovereignty and territorial integrity, working to maintain the foreign occupation of parts of Syria and its further division, plundering natural resources and inciting hostility between various sectors of the country's population.

Thirdly, we urge all States and Syrian opposition groups to cease their aggressive and hateful rhetoric directed at Syria's legitimate authorities and at Russia, and to stop taking steps intended to bring about a violent overthrow of power.

Fourthly, we call on States that wield corresponding influence to work to finally and irrevocably separate the armed groups from terrorists and to embark on genuine international cooperation in combating terrorism, without double standards.

Fifthly, we urge the international community to join the efforts to bring Syria humanitarian assistance without delay and to reject any manipulation of the issue for political purposes.

Lastly, we call on opposition entities to immediately abandon any incitements to external aggression through provocations using chemical weapons, and on their Western sponsors not to exploit such provocations.

Mr. Almunayekh (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I would like to thank Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, for his briefing today. The Security Council has been preoccupied, especially of late, with the situation in Syria, which has seen dangerous and accelerating developments. That is why we need to address all these developments in an appropriate manner and further our efforts to reach a comprehensive political solution to the crisis in Syria.

Resolution 2401 (2018), adopted unanimously by the Council less than two months ago, addressed the humanitarian situation across Syria. The resolution demanded a cessation of hostilities for at least 30 days without delay in order to allow the United Nations and its partners to deliver humanitarian assistance and ensure the evacuation of the sick and wounded, in accordance with international law. We underscore once again the Council's demand in resolution 2401 (2018) for unhindered and sustained access for humanitarian convoys, including medical material. We remind all parties of their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law, and we call for an immediate end to all attacks on civilians, residential areas and medical facilities, in accordance with the resolution.

We are deeply frustrated by the failure of compliance with resolution 2401 (2018). We call on the parties with influence to work with the Syrian authorities in particular and to urge them to implement resolution 2401 (2018), pursuant to international humanitarian law. We expect the guarantor countries of Astana agreement — Russia, Iran and Turkey — to ensure progress on that front, in accordance with the declaration issued by the tripartite summit held in Istanbul on 4 April.

We agree with the statement to be delivered by the representative of Sweden regarding our concern over the humanitarian situation in eastern Ghouta and Idlib, in northern Aleppo. We also express our concern at the increasing obstacles facing the United Nations and its efforts to reach civilians who had fled eastern Ghouta. We call on the Syrian Government to facilitate the access of United Nations staff to camps for internally displaced persons.

Regarding Raqqa, we thank Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for his update today following the recent humanitarian assessment visit. We welcome the efforts of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs to prepare the necessary humanitarian plans in order to provide assistance to

Raqqa and remove all mines and explosive devices, which pose a threat to the safe return of internally displaced persons and refugees.

Concerning the situation in Rukban, we stress the need to ensure sustained humanitarian access to camps in the area from inside Syria. We urge the United Nations and its partners to deliver this assistance as soon as possible.

In closing, we urge Member States to participate actively in the donor conference on the humanitarian situation in Syria which will be held in Brussels next week, given the conference's important role in alleviating the situation of the Syrian people, whose suffering is now in its eighth year, with no serious settlement in view.

Mr. Orrenius Skau (Sweden): Let me begin by thanking Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for the second time today for his update on the humanitarian situation in Syria. His briefing serves to remind us — if a reminder were needed — of the scale of the humanitarian crisis facing Syria and the humanitarian community. Over 12 million people, half of Syria's population, are now displaced inside and outside the country. The 700,000 people who fled their homes since just the beginning of this year as a result of the unremitting and horrific violence join this mass of humankind seeking shelter and protection.

Resolution 2401 (2018), unanimously adopted on 24 February, sought to provide relief for those inside Syria by ensuring a durable humanitarian pause in the conflict. We deplore the lack of implementation of resolution 2401 (2018) to date. It is imperative that we all increase our efforts to ensure its full and immediate implementation across Syria. In that regard, the Astana guarantors must live up to their commitments, as articulated in the joint statement by their Presidents on 4 April.

We reiterate the Council's demand in resolution 2401 (2018) for unimpeded and sustained access for weekly humanitarian convoys — I repeat, weekly humanitarian convoys — including with medical items. We remind all parties of their obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law and call for an immediate end to all attacks on civilians, civilian objects and medical facilities, as demanded in resolution 2401 (2018).

We are gravely concerned for the civilians remaining in Douma, who have been subject to intensive violence, leading to the deaths of civilians and the destruction of civilian infrastructure. We call on the Syrian authorities to grant facilitation letters for humanitarian convoys to Douma immediately.

We are also concerned about the increased obstacles facing the United Nations in gaining access to civilians who have fled eastern Ghouta. We call on the Syrian authorities to immediately facilitate sustained access for United Nations personnel to internally displaced persons' camps. In addition, the Syrian authorities must immediately grant the visa requests for staff of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs as part of the much-needed humanitarian surge currently under way.

We reiterate that any evacuation, from eastern Ghouta or elsewhere, must be voluntary and in line with international law. Those who decide to leave should do so to a safe place of their choice, and with the right to return. An increased United Nations presence is vital to respond to the needs, not least the protection needs, of both those remaining in eastern Ghouta and for those arriving at reception sites.

Turning to Raqqa, we thank Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for his timely update, which comes following the recent humanitarian assessment mission. We welcome the planning now under way for assistance to these areas. Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) represent a hidden and deadly threat to the people returning to Raqqa. We are deeply troubled by the high number of victims of these devices cited in latest report of the Secretary-General (S/2018/243). The clearing of mines and IEDs will be essential for the safe return of internally displaced persons and the rehabilitation of communities. We call on all to contribute to the implementation of this provision of resolution 2401 (2018).

We are gravely concerned about the situation of civilians in Rukban, many of whom are women and children. Sustained humanitarian access is essential, as is the need to find longer-term and durable solutions to the situation there. We call on the United Nations and its partners to undertake the planned humanitarian delivery to Rukban as soon as possible.

The humanitarian situation in Idlib is also extremely worrying, given the rapid increase in internally displaced persons fleeing to the governorate

and months of attacks on health-care facilities. The cross-border deliveries of humanitarian aid continue to constitute a lifeline for Syrians in acute need in Idlib.

We are also concerned about the situation of the almost 140,000 people displaced from Afrin. We welcome the scaled-up humanitarian response, including deliveries to areas hosting internally displaced persons. We call on the Syrian authorities to ensure freedom of movement for internally displaced persons to access medical services, and on Turkey to enable the safe, voluntary and dignified return of those who have been forced to flee.

The scale of the crisis in Syria and the humanitarian response needed remains immense. The humanitarian community is undertaking a herculean task, and we commend all those working in extremely challenging conditions. We must stand with them and the people of Syria. In that regard, we are deeply troubled by the acute lack of financing for United Nations humanitarian operations in Syria. We call on all Member States to make substantial commitments at the Brussels conference next week and to disburse those pledges as early as possible. Sweden can be counted upon to continue contributing generously to the humanitarian response in Syria.

Finally, let me reiterate what has been said in this Chamber numerous times before, as it deserves to be repeated: the only sustainable way to solve the humanitarian crisis in Syria is through a political solution to the conflict. At this critical time, we must seek to revitalize the United Nations-led political process, try to put our differences aside and shoulder the responsibility entrusted to the Council.

Ms. Eckels-Currie (United States of America): I thank Under-Secretary-General Lowcock once again for his briefing. As always, he informs us and puts the gravity of Syria's humanitarian situation in perspective.

First, given all of the interesting accusations we heard earlier, I want to make a few points crystal clear. The 75 members of the Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham (ISIS) joined forces to liberate people from ISIS control in Iraq, and the Coalition continues our campaign to eradicate ISIS in Syria. Despite the difficulty of the task, our operations have succeeded in rolling back the so-called ISIS caliphate and addressing a dire threat to our collective peace and security.

The Coalition made those gains while the Al-Assad regime and its backers focused their guns mostly on the Syrian opposition groups that were not ISIS terrorists. While we went after ISIS and actually achieved lasting gains for the Syrian people, the Al-Assad regime was busy bombarding civilians in places like Aleppo, Idlib and eastern Ghouta. The Coalition's operations were carried out in scrupulous regard for the laws of war and to minimize civilian casualties. In Raqqa, our partners conducted a neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood evacuation of civilians ISIS had trapped in the city.

The United States will once again put on the record that United Nations humanitarian convoys are welcome at any time in Raqqa or Rukban. We welcome that assistance and are ready to do everything that we can to assist it. As Under-Secretary-General Lowcock noted, a United Nations inter-agency team successfully carried out an assessment in Raqqa just two weeks ago. In Rukban, Coalition forces are also acting to support humanitarian efforts and have worked with the United Nations and other partners to provide requested details on operational security and medical evacuations. The bottom line is that the United States is ready to support humanitarian deliveries. The delay, as always, continues to be whether the Al-Assad regime will grant permission for United Nations convoys to move.

We keep hearing in this Chamber about mine clearance in Raqqa. Removing unexploded ordnance is one of our top priorities when it comes to stabilizing the area: so far we have cleared almost 3,000 explosive remnants of war; we have cleared almost 300 critical infrastructure sites; provided mine risk education for 40,000 people and trained over 120 Syrians to conduct demining operations. This task is not easy, thanks to the quantity of munitions ISIS left behind, but we recognize this work is vital to ensure Syrians can return home safely.

On top of mine clearance in Raqqa, we have provided more than $50 million in food and non-food items to the most vulnerable. For example, we have given close to 300,000 pounds of food and 151 million litres of water to more than 195,000 people. I could go on and talk about the schools and medical clinics we have supported or our efforts to restore electricity. We would be happy to brief our fellow Council members at any time on those details.

The issue is that we are not here to educate ourselves about the work of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS

in Raqqa and our continued efforts to facilitate cross-line delivery into Rukban. Russia has called us here as part of a messaging campaign to try to distract from the atrocities committed by the Al-Assad regime. In order to do that, Russia has asked the Security Council to focus its attention on the one part of Syria where the Al-Assad regime is not pummelling civilians to death with barrel bombs or banned chemical weapons.

Consider what has taken place since the Security Council demanded a ceasefire in resolution 2401 (2018). On 24 February, the Council demanded a halt to the fighting in Syria. Instead, the same day the resolution was adopted, the Al-Assad regime flagrantly disregarded it. The Al-Assad regime and its backers ignored the Council and launched an all-out campaign to seize eastern Ghouta. The campaign culminated in the use of chemical weapons against innocent men, women and children. Over 151,000 civilians were displaced.

Now fighting is escalating in north-western Syria. Between 2 and 17 April, Syrian and Russian air strikes damaged four medical facilities in that part of the country — a disturbing repeat of previous circumstances. Between mid-March and early April, air strikes reportedly killed another 188 civilians and injured 120 others. In addition to a ceasefire, the Council has also called again and again for unhindered humanitarian access in Syria. However, since the beginning of 2018, the Syrian authorities have only allowed six cross-line interagency convoys to deliver humanitarian aid — six. That is just five per cent of the cross-line assistance requested by the United Nations.

More than ever, we need to focus on ensuring that the Council's demand for a ceasefire and for unhindered humanitarian access actually gets implemented on the ground, but that would require the Al-Assad regime to stop its brutal campaign against the Syrian people, and the countries with influence over Al-Assad to join us in demanding that the Al-Assad regime stop is senseless slaughter of the Syrian people.

The United States will not stop focusing on the ways to achieve that goal, no matter how many times our Russian colleagues convene these cynical, thinly disguised diversions.

Mr. Delattre (France) (*spoke in French*): At the outset, I would like to thank the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Mr. Mark Lowcock, for his briefing, and once again commend his tireless efforts, as well as those of his teams, in responding to the urgency and gravity of the humanitarian situation in Syria. I would also like to thank Russia for requesting this briefing, which enables us to take stock of the humanitarian situation in both Raqqa and Rukban, a month and a half after the adoption of resolution 2401 (2018).

I will say a few words on the humanitarian situation in Syria as a whole before addressing the specific cases of Raqqa and Rukban, and then finally reiterate our call for true assistance to their people by guaranteeing rapid and secure humanitarian access. That constitutes an key element of our draft resolution on Syria, which is still under negotiation among members of the Security Council.

Despite the adoption of resolution 2401 (2018) and our repeated appeals, the urgency of the humanitarian situation in Syria is flagrant. The situation on the ground in Syria is a nightmare that sees no relief. As we have had the opportunity to highlight during each of the Council's meetings on the subject, the land offensives, sieges, indiscriminate bombings — including on schools and hospitals — and the use of chemical weapons against the people of Douma on 7 April have razed Syria to the ground, with complete disregard for international law. Resorting to terror as a tactic of war has led, as we all know, to horrific consequences. Moreover, since 18 February, at least 1,800 people have been killed and thousands are suffering from often irremediable wounds.

As Mr. Lowcock has just stated, the humanitarian tragedy in Syria remains a daily scandal and a permanent insult to the global conscience. Since 9 March, approximately 151,000 Syrians have been forced to flee eastern Ghouta. Between 90,000 and 100,000 of them were compelled to join the camps around Damascus, which have restricted access to basic services. To date, only 45,000 people have been authorized to leave the camps, where reception capacities are saturated. Despite the urgent situation, access to the camps is complicated due to the regime's intensified administrative procedures for humanitarian actors. Humanitarian access for people remaining in eastern Ghouta faces similar obstructions, especially in Douma. These are all tragedies and blatant violations of international humanitarian law.

In Idlib, the arrival of tens of thousands of people evacuated from eastern Ghouta has further exacerbated the humanitarian situation in the province, which

now hosts more than 1.2 million internally displaced persons. That means that we must be both active and vigilant when it comes to Idlib: active, in view of the very difficult situation that prevails there today, but also especially vigilant with regard to the risks of further outbursts of violence in the region. If we are not careful, the worst is yet to come in Idlib.

With regard to the situation in Raqqa, as Mr. Lowcock described in his briefing, the city is faced with the challenge posed by the return of 90,000 people. The challenge is certainly a considerable one. However, we must note some positive developments, such as the reopening of schools and three functioning clinics, as well as the distribution of schoolbooks, to mention but a few examples. It is henceforth necessary to allow humanitarian actors to channel water, food and other responses to meet the basic needs of the population. Given the situation left behind by Da'esh in the city, humanitarian demining also presents a crucial issue that all else depends on and where efforts already undertaken must absolutely be continued and augmented. That is an effort in which France is fully participating. We set aside €10 million at the end of 2017 and financed a dozen projects for displaced persons and those wishing to resettle in Raqqa in particular, as well as emergency aid, restoration of basic services, health care and mine clearance.

In Rukban, discussions with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent must lead to allowing the channelling and unloading of cargo by the United Nations, all while ensuring the safety of humanitarian personnel. As resolution 2401 (2018) has not been implemented, I wish to reiterate here, on behalf of France, our urgent appeal to guarantee rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access throughout Syrian territory. That is indeed the key, along with the cessation of hostilities, to a real improvement in the humanitarian situation in Syria. Specifically, that means that the Syrian regime must issue the necessary visas and letters of authorization to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and other humanitarian actors, with three immediate operational objectives in mind.

First, a sufficient number of humanitarian convoys must reach areas that are difficult to access or besieged, and the safety of humanitarian personnel must be guaranteed. Secondly, civilians that remain in eastern Ghouta must receive urgent humanitarian assistance and protection. Thirdly, assistance must be provided to displaced persons, including in the camps and host communities around Damascus, in the Idlib province and in the Euphrates region. The regime's recovery of eastern Ghouta, in the terrible conditions we know of, does not change those imperatives, which fall under international humanitarian law and resolution 2401 (2018), adopted unanimously by the Council.

It is precisely those objectives that we strongly support in the context of the draft resolution submitted by France, the United Kingdom and the United States to members of the Security Council on Saturday and which was discussed at its first reading yesterday. Our draft resolution aims to achieve essential progress in humanitarian terms, fully consistent with the priorities expressed today. Given the catastrophic situation of the population, France has launched an emergency humanitarian programme of €50 million. The draft resolution also aims to recreate a mechanism for the attribution of responsibility with regard to the use of chemical weapons and to put a definitive end to the Syrian chemical programme. Finally, it requests that conclusive political negotiations be held under the auspices of the United Nations and with the support of Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2018).

Finally, beyond the silo approach — which has led to so many impasses — the initiative France has taken with this draft resolution, alongside our British and American partners, articulates, for the first time, humanitarian, political and chemical aspects of the Syrian equation. Through this comprehensive and integrated approach, the draft resolution seeks to recreate a space for negotiation, establish potential areas of convergence and therefore — we hope — create the conditions for a truly diplomatic dynamic on the Syrian dossier. We all know how difficult the task is, but we hope that this approach will help us to break free of the impasse and open up the way to genuine negotiations.

Given the interest sparked by our draft resolution and by the first constructive discussions it has led to, this new approach is, in any case, broadly supported and involves committing on this basis to deepened negotiations that require good faith in the goal to reach a conclusion, even though we are all aware of how challenging that will be. We owe it to the Syrian people who, in their diversity, await us in despair.

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): Before I start, if I may make a request of the Secretariat — it would be very helpful, I think, for the Council to have either a

briefing or a brief account of where the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons Fact-finding Mission and the United Nations Department of Safety and Security currently are and what their forward plans are. Furthermore, it would be useful to know whether there has been any delay in their getting into Douma and an account of what has caused that delay. If it were possible to have that within the next 24 hours, I would be very grateful.

Turning to the issue before us in this meeting, I would like to join others in thanking the Under-Secretary-General for his briefing. It is a pity that some speakers have used today's account of the humanitarian situation to make political points. I recall the English philosopher Edmund Burke, who said that it is a general popular error to imagine the loudest complainers for the public to be the most anxious for its welfare. I think that might apply rather too much today.

We are talking about resolution 2401 (2018). I do not have the full compendium of the British Government's activities on the humanitarian side in Syria, but I can say that in 2017 we gave $160 million to the United Nations appeal and in 2018 we are giving $138 million dollars. That compares to $5.5 million in 2017 and, as far as I know, zero in 2018 from Russia. We are one of the top three donors to the Syrian humanitarian response plan, and we are the second largest bilateral donor to the humanitarian response in Syria since 2011. To date, we have committed $3.5 billion in response to the Syria crisis, and that is the United Kingdom's largest-ever response to a single humanitarian crisis. We encourage all of us to do what we can to support United Nations appeals and we, too, will be playing an active role in the Brussels conference, which is to come.

Turning to Raqqa, we welcomed the first United Nations assessment mission. The United Kingdom continues to provide humanitarian support to Raqqa and surrounding areas. Last October, we stepped up our support to north-east Syria by restocking hospitals and mobile surgical units and providing 145,000 medical consultations and 31,000 relief kits, which included cooking equipment and blankets. We helped improve access to clean water for 15,000 people. We are also contributing to the clearance of mines and explosives in Raqqa, and we are looking at ways to provide additional support to mine-clearance across Syria.

Turning to Rukban, I would like to take the opportunity to commend the Government of Jordan for providing humanitarian access to the population, including the distribution of essential aid in January 2018. Further, we commend the efforts of United Nations humanitarian agencies that have been negotiating access from Damascus. I would like to emphasize the right of displaced civilians in Rukban in the so-called berm to protection and sustained humanitarian services and distributions, whether they are cross-line or cross-border, in accordance with humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law.

We urge the regime and its backers to facilitate access for the United Nations and humanitarian partners to deliver desperately needed assistance to the estimated 70,000 to 80,000 people in Douma and all those remaining in eastern Ghouta. Like other speakers, we too are concerned about the poor conditions in camps and sites where people from eastern Ghouta have fled. We look forward to a position where they can have freedom of movement and where they can be allowed to return home. In the meantime, they must be protected against regime reprisals, and we have, in consultations at an earlier stage, asked for more attention to be given by the United Nations, but also by the Syrian Government, to giving visas to United Nations staff who can go in and help perform a protection function.

I had intended to speak about the political resolution and next steps, but the French Ambassador has laid this out very clearly, and I have nothing to add to that but that I wholeheartedly support what he said. We call on all members of the Council to rally to the notion that we should use what has happened as an opportunity to get the political process back on track. We want to have a very good discussion of possible ways to do so at our retreat in Sweden where we will have the benefit of the presence of the Secretary-General as well.

In closing, I would like to end with one of Edmund Burke's more famous pleas: "All that is needed for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." We can all do something and I hope we will use the next days wisely.

Mr. Tumysh (Kazakhstan): We thank the delegation of the Russian Federation for initiating today's open briefing on the very critical humanitarian situation in Syria, and we thank Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock for his comprehensive and very informative briefing. Like others, we express our serious concern about the continuing severe and devastating nature of the humanitarian situation in Syria.

Turning to the main topic of our briefing today, we welcome the assessment mission to Raqqa that had been conducted by our humanitarian colleagues from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs on 1 April. It is indeed worrisome that despite a high level of unexploded ordnance on the ground, an estimated 100,000 people have reportedly returned to Raqqa. The team has reported, through facts obtained by the local council, on the extremely high level of destruction, with nearly 70 per cent of buildings either having been razed to the ground or damaged, and many services, such as water, electricity, and health care, lacking or severely limited. Some schools have resumed but are without school materials and other supplies. It is commendable that the United Nations and local non-governmental partners are providing assistance to those in need in the city, and also responding to gaps and priority needs in the areas of essential aid and basic services.

We are also worried about the fate of the Rukban and Hadalat refugee camps, located on the way to the Jordanian border in the 55-kilometre-radius protected zone. According to our information, in both camps, about 85,000 refugees are living in tents. Many are ill and suffering from hunger and a lack of attention, owing to a shortage of doctors and medical supplies. We consider the camp to have the dangerous potential of turning into a place where anything goes — where foreign mercenaries, instructors and recruiters to the ranks of radical organizations operate without constraints. We are also alarmed at reports that armed groups do not allow humanitarian convoys of the United Nations and the Syrian Government into the security zone. We call for the World Health Organization and other United Nations humanitarian partners to be permitted entry into the camps.

We support the proposal of the Russian Federation to establish humanitarian corridors for the withdrawal of refugees from the area of Al-Tanf and the Rukban camp, using as an example of corridors created by Russian and Syrian military during the crisis in Aleppo, when thousands of civilians left the city. We also commend the authorities in Jordan who, earlier this year, have allowed a one-off delivery of United Nations humanitarian aid by crane-lift to tens of thousands of displaced persons from Syria.

Kazakhstan calls on all parties for an immediate suspension of all war activities in Syria, allowing humanitarian aid to reach all those in need, as well as evacuation of all patients requiring urgent treatment that cannot be provided there. Kazakhstan supports all the relevant Security Council resolutions so as to ensure principled, sustained and improved humanitarian assistance to Syria in 2018.

In the light of the prevailing circumstances, the need for all Council members to implement the recently adopted resolution 2401 (2018) is most critical. We look forward to ongoing frequent and periodic reporting to the Council on the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018) through the regular Syria briefings and the Secretary-General's reports, as stipulated in the resolution. In this context, we support the results of the second trilateral meeting of the Heads of States guarantors of the Astana process — the Presidents of Russia, Turkey and Iran — that took place on 4 April in Ankara. We believe that this summit of the troika is an important step towards the settlement of the Syrian war.

Lastly, we must focus on Syrian national unity, which is critical, particularly after the defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. After the prolonged war, the question of boundaries and territories must be addressed in accordance with the Constitution in order to prevent a re-emergence of extremist groups. The issues before us are the legal and political future of Raqqa and must take into account the interests and rights of the various ethnic and tribal groups that compose the local population.

Mr. Radomski (Poland): At the outset, I would like to thank Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock for his comprehensive briefing.

Once again, Poland would like to strongly emphasize the utmost importance of providing sustained and uninterrupted access for all humanitarian actors in the whole of Syria. We call upon all parties to the conflict to implement the ceasefire and ensure humanitarian access and medical evacuations as unanimously agreed in resolution 2401 (2018).

We remain deeply concerned about the situations in Idlib governorate, which is struggling with the influx of new internally displaced persons, and in Aleppo province. In this context, we believe that military operations in north-western Syria have further complicated the situation and led to significant displacement of the local population, which is another source of our grave concern.

We would like to reiterate our strong call on all parties affecting the situation on the ground, especially

the Russian Federation and Iran, to take all actions necessary to arrive at the full cessation of hostilities across the entire territory of Syria. We insist that all parties in Syria comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law. Some small positive steps involving some eight convoys were taken in mid-March, which shows that it is possible to make progress even though much more is needed. Unfortunately, we have not yet seen any significant changes in that area. In that connection, we call on Russia, Iran and Turkey to fulfil their obligations and responsibilities as Astana guarantors.

Like many others, we would like to underline the importance of the upcoming second Brussels conference. It will address the tragic humanitarian situation in Syria and reiterate the international community's support to those in need in Syria, as well as in neighbouring countries.

We would like also to take this opportunity to reiterate our opinion that there can be no military solution to the Syrian conflict. We have always supported efforts to end the war in Syria.

In conclusion, let me once again underline that a political agreement remains the only way to achieve a sustainable solution to this conflict, including the lasting eradication of violent extremism. That requires a genuine political transition in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué of 2012 (S/2012/522, annex) negotiated by the Syrian parties within the United Nations-led Geneva process. In that regard, Poland commends the tireless efforts of the Special Envoy for Syria, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, to facilitate the implementation of all relevant Security Council resolutions.

Mr. Ndong Mba (Equatorial Guinea) (*spoke in Spanish*): The Republic of Equatorial Guinea would like to thank the Russian Federation for convening this meeting and the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. Mark Lowcock, for his illustrative and detailed description of the humanitarian situation in the city of Raqqa and the Rukban refugee camp.

Four months ago, in December last year, when Security Council members adopted resolution 2393 (2017), they noted the high numbers of displaced persons and refugees who had fled Syria to neighbouring countries as a result of the escalation of violence and the serious humanitarian crisis (see S/PV.8141). Since 2015, clashes in Raqqa have led many Syrian families to move to the Rukban camp on Jordan's northern borders, while Syrian opposition forces and Shia militias have been fighting at the Al-Tanf border crossing and the triangular border territory between Jordan, Iraq and Syria.

It should be recalled that Raqqa was the main Syrian stronghold of the Islamic State. The situation in Raqqa is particularly difficult, given that military offensives have led to the destruction of large swaths of civilian infrastructure and housing.

The Republic of Equatorial Guinea reiterates its deep concern about the devastating humanitarian situation in Syria, and in the case before us, in Raqqa and in the Rukban camp. We commend the efforts and work of the World Health Organization, which has been providing thousands of people in Raqqa with medicine and supplies. However, Raqqqa residents remain deprived of humanitarian assistance since there are no international humanitarian organizations in the region and local authorities cannot improve the situation.

Moreover, the situation of civilians returning to Raqqa, where they face ongoing danger owing to the high number of landmines and improvised explosive devices, as well as to the epidemiological situation in the city, with thousands of bodies still under the rubble of destroyed buildings, demands the utmost attention of the international community and the Security Council so that urgent action can be taken. In that regard, my delegation continues to encourage those countries with the capacity to influence the parties to the conflict to seek a way to achieve significant progress in implementing the provisions of resolution 2401 (2018) and in providing regular and sustained access to the people of Raqqa and the Rukban camp to international humanitarian organizations and United Nations convoys in order to care for the sick and wounded and to meet the urgent needs that cannot be met by sporadic deliveries.

We conclude our statement by recalling the desire and will of the peoples of Africa, as expressed in the communiqué of the African Union Commission of 15 April, which stresses that:

> "The Syrian people have suffered far too long. In the face of this dire situation, the only sensible course of action is the intensification of international efforts to find a lasting political solution based solely on

the interests of the Syrian people and respecting the territorial integrity of Syria."

Mr. Dah (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): My delegation thanks the Russian Federation for taking the initiative to organize this briefing on the humanitarian situation in Raqqa and Rukban. We also thank Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, for his enlightening briefing on the humanitarian situation in Syria, and in particular on those two localities in the framework of the implementation of resolution 2401 (2018).

Despite the recent relative lull, my delegation remains concerned about the precariousness of the humanitarian situation on the ground. Indeed, over two months after its unanimous adoption, my delegation notes with regret that resolution 2401 (2018) has not been implemented. It should be recalled that the resolution requires a long-term humanitarian pause to allow for the safe and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance and related services, as well as the medical evacuation of the seriously ill and wounded, in accordance with applicable international law.

My delegation reiterates its call for the full implementation of resolution 2401 (2018) throughout the country — from eastern Ghouta to Douma and Afrin, where humanitarian needs are just as urgent — as well as in Raqqa and in the Rukban internally displaced persons (IDPs) camp, which is in the grip of a humanitarian disaster.

While terrorist groups have been defeated and driven out of the city of Raqqa, the return of people to their areas of origin remains problematic owing to the lack of infrastructure, including health and social infrastructure, as well as the lack of many services, such as water supplies and electricity. Furthermore, the presence of unexploded ordinance poses a serious danger for the population. According to the World Health Organization and UNICEF, between 20 October 2017 and 23 February 2018, at least 658 people were reportedly wounded and over 130 others killed by mines, booby-traps and unexploded ordnance in the city, where there were an average of six blast incidents per day. Limited access to care also aggravates the danger for people wounded by those explosions. In that respect, my delegation calls for the mobilization of the international community to provide the necessary assistance for the recovery of the wounded and to support demining activities and raise awareness of the dangers posed by improvised explosive devices.

With regard to the Rukban IDP camp, my delegation remains concerned about the extremely precarious living conditions of the local population, which are mainly related to the lack of access to the camp, which is regularly subject to sandstorms and rising water salinity. In addition, the location of that remote camp, with no road access, makes it difficult to provide medicine, food and drinking water to residents. My delegation urges the parties to the conflict to authorize humanitarian agencies to conduct missions to those areas to assess the needs of the populations and provide them with adequate humanitarian assistance, in accordance with resolution 2401 (2018).

Côte d'Ivoire believes that the international community's action, with a view to providing an adequate humanitarian response to the needs of the Syrian people, must be part of our overall collective efforts to seek a political solution to the crisis in Syria. We therefore reiterate our principled position in favour of a negotiated settlement of the Syrian conflict in the framework of an inclusive political dialogue among the different actors on the basis of the Geneva process, pursuant to resolution 2254 (2015).

Mrs. Gregoire Van Haaren (Netherlands): Let me thank Under-Secretary-General Mr. Lowcock for his informative briefing.

We welcome the opportunity to address the humanitarian situation in Syria and again call for the immediate implementation of resolution 2401 (2018) throughout the country.

The dire humanitarian needs of those inside Syria should be the focus of our attention, irrespective of the location of those in need. Humanitarian access and the protection of civilians remain our main priorities. As many have mentioned, the European Union and the United Nations will co-chair the second Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region, which will take place in Brussels on 24 and 25 April. It is hoped that it will help raise funds to address urgent humanitarian needs in Syria, as well as garner political support for the United Nations-led peace process. Both are urgently needed. As the Syrian war enters its eighth year, we hope for the continued solidarity of the international community with the more than 13 million Syrians now in need of humanitarian assistance.

In my statement I will focus on three areas: the situation in Ghouta, Idlib and Afrin, the situation in Raqqa and the situation in Rukban.

First, with regard to Ghouta, Idlib and Afrin, the military offensive by the regime in eastern Ghouta has led to an additional 150,000 internally displaced civilians. After fleeing the violence, they are now hosted in Idlib and immediate surroundings in rural Damascus. Urgent shelter, food and medical care are needed for those who were forced out of their homes in Ghouta.

Reports of sexual violence against women are cause for great concern. Women, girls and others voicing concerns about gender-based violence should be heard and helped. At the beginning of the year, we held frequent discussions about the growing list of medical evacuees. There were 1,000 people on the list. We were appalled to learn that many of the severely sick and injured were on evacuation buses to Idlib for many hours. Such a trip is medically irresponsible. Those are not the kind of medical evacuations that resolution 2401 (2018) called for. Furthermore, those who remain in Douma need aid.

The Kingdom of the Netherlands is concerned about the fact that no facilitation letters have been provided by the regime for aid convoys into Douma. I recall resolution 2401 (2018), which demands unimpeded and sustained delivery of humanitarian aid to those in need. Access for that aid, as well as access to Douma for the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons Fact-finding Mission in the Syrian Arab Republic, is urgently needed. We call for the independent monitoring of the collective shelters for internally displaced persons in rural Damascus. Families should not be torn apart by separating men from their wives and children. Where that has happened, the process of family reunification is needed.

The urgent needs of internally displaced persons throughout Syria call for a humanitarian surge. To that end, the United Nations requests entry into the country to help the Syrian population. We call on the Syrian regime to provide the additional staff from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) with visas as soon as possible. We also call the attention of the Council to the plight of more than 180,000 people who have been displaced by hostilities in Afrin district. The massive influx of internally displaced persons puts a strain on host communities that are already overwhelmed. We call on all parties to allow for humanitarian access and for the freedom of movement of the internally displaced.

Secondly, the liberation of Raqqa from Da'esh has been a positive and decisive step in the fight against Da'esh in Syria. It is now important to contribute to the stabilization of Raqqa and to promote inclusive governance. The protection of civilians and of humanitarian organizations and other non-governmental organizations must be respected at all times. We welcome the fact that OCHA has been able to conduct a humanitarian needs assessment mission. On that basis, a coordinated humanitarian response can be deployed. The clearance of improvised explosive devices is a priority. Demining is essential so that internally displaced persons can safely return home. The Kingdom of the Netherlands contributes to demining activities in and around Raqqa and calls on other Council members to do the same.

My third point relates to Rukban, the so-called berm. The situation in Rukban, where more than 50,000 displaced people remain, is worrisome. The last food distribution took place in January. Apart from food, medical aid is also a necessity and should be made available to all those trapped in that area. It is important that aid reach those people through the fastest and easiest route.

Finally, let me conclude by again stressing the importance of the immediate implementation of resolution 2401 (2018) throughout Syria. Humanitarian access, as well as the protection of civilians, remains a necessity, in accordance with international humanitarian law.

Mr. Ma Zhaoxu (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): China welcomes the initiative taken by Russia to convene today's public meeting.

We thank Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for his briefing and commend the United Nations on its efforts to ease the humanitarian situation in Syria.

The Syrian conflict has lasted more than seven years, inflicting endless suffering on the Syrian people. It is our strong hope that all parties in Syria can resolve their issues through dialogue and consultations. It is imperative that the international community play a constructive role to immediately ease the humanitarian crisis in Syria. As always, China will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to Syria.

More than a month ago, through the concerted efforts of all parties concerned, the Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2401 (2018), reflecting its solidarity and consensus on the humanitarian situation in Syria. China calls on all parties in Syria to comply with the resolution in order to achieve an immediate cessation of hostilities, provide humanitarian assistance and actively coordinate with United Nations humanitarian assistance efforts. The United Nations and the international community must implement resolution 2401 (2018), pay equal attention to the humanitarian situation in all regions in Syria, provide assistance to all areas in need of humanitarian assistance, and help displaced persons return home as soon as possible.

I reiterate that China has always promoted the peaceful settlement of disputes and objects to the use of force in international relations. We choose to respect the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of all countries. Any action taken by the parties concerned must be in line with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations. All action must be taken within the framework of international law. Any unilateral military action that circumvents the Council contravenes the purposes and principles of the Charter and violates the basic norms of international law and international relations, and will compound efforts to settle the crisis in Syria. China urges the parties concerned to refrain from any act that could lead to an escalation of the situation, return to the norms of international law and resolve issues through dialogue and consultation.

A political settlement is the only way to resolve the situation in Syria. China is committed to working with the international community to facilitate peace talks, encourage the cessation of hostilities, violence and terrorism, and advance the process for a political settlement, including through the Geneva peace talks. Given the current situation, it is imperative for the international community to enhance cooperation and support the United Nations as the primary mediator to restore peace, stability and calm in Syria and the Middle East as soon as possible.

Mr. Inchauste Jordán (Plurinational State of Bolivia) (*spoke in Spanish*): We thank the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Mr. Mark Lowcock, for his briefing. We commend the efforts of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and all the humanitarian agencies that have managed to deliver the humanitarian aid so needed by the people. We hope that those efforts can be duplicated in the besieged and difficult-to-access areas in order to reach as many civilians in need as possible. Bolivia believes that it is important to take all the measures necessary to ensure the reconstruction of Raqqa and other cities in Syria. We call on the relevant parties to spare no effort to ensure the safe and dignified return of the families that were forced to leave their homes for humanitarian and security reasons.

According to the latest report of the Secretary-General (S/2018/243), since October 2017, 86,000 civilians returned to the city of Raqqa, 20,600 of whom returned in February alone. We regret that 130 civilians died and 658 were seriously injured in accidents caused by remnants of anti-personnel mines and explosive remnants of war. We reiterate the urgency of demining efforts, beginning with the clearance of explosive remnants of war and improvised explosive devices, as a fundamental step for the safe return of the civilian population. Furthermore, such work is essential for the restoration of basic infrastructure and services to meet immediate humanitarian needs and facilitate long-term reconstruction. In that regard, we believe that the efforts of the United Nations Mine Action Service are key.

We regret that violence continues in the main cities of Syria, but it is even more reprehensible that as a result of those clashes civilian infrastructure, such as hospitals, schools and residential areas, has been affected. We also regret that obstacles remain to the full implementation of resolution 2401 (2018), and we call on all parties involved to make every effort to achieve its effective implementation throughout the Syrian territory, in order to facilitate the provision of humanitarian aid and services in a safe, sustained and unhindered manner, in addition to the realization of medical evacuations of seriously ill and injured persons.

We remind the parties to the conflict once again that they must allow unconditional access for the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and guarantee and safeguard its security and integrity, especially in besieged and difficult-to-access areas. We reiterate once more our highest recognition of the work undertaken by humanitarian agencies, and we call for respect for international law and international humanitarian law in the discharge of their dangerous duties on the ground.

In conclusion, we reject any attempt at fragmentation or sectarianism in Syria,

and we believe that the Syrian people must freely decide its future and political leadership within the framework of its sovereignty and territorial integrity. We reiterate that the only way to resolve the conflict is through a political process that is inclusive, negotiated, coordinated and led by and for the Syrian people, which will enable the achievement of sustainable peace in their territory, without pressure or interference.

Mr. Woldegerima (Ethiopia): We thank the Russian Federation for calling for this meeting. We are once again very grateful to Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock for his briefing. We reiterate our appreciation to the United Nations and its humanitarian partners for continuing to provide assistance to millions of Syrians in difficult circumstances. We welcome the fact that the United Nations was able to conduct its first humanitarian assessment mission in Raqqa on 1 April, after the defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.

As mentioned by the Under-Secretary-General, the destruction of infrastructure, in addition to very limited public services, such as electricity and the sewage system, continue to be the major challenging features of the city. Moreover, the prevalence of land mines and explosives, which have continued to cause the deaths and injuries of civilians, poses a significant concern. That makes a safe return to the city a major challenge, although civilians continue to return. Demining efforts should be further strengthened and restoring normal life in the city should be the priority.

In that regard, we are encouraged that the United Nations is now preparing to deliver aid, and we hope that the returnees will receive humanitarian assistance in complement to the aid programmes. It is also imperative to deliver aid to all parts of the country. As the humanitarian crisis in Syria remains a source of deep concern, we reiterate that it is vital to ensure safe, unhindered and regular humanitarian access to allow the United Nations and its partners to reach those in need of life-saving assistance throughout Syria.

In that regard, we underscorethe importance of the full implementation of resolution 2401 (2018), which the Council adopted unanimously. We believe that to contribute to the alleviation of the ongoing suffering of the people of Syria, the Council should restore its unity through genuine and productive dialogue.

Finally, we fully endorse what the Ambassador of Equatorial Guinea stated with regard to the statement issued by the Chairperson of the African Union Commission on the situation in Syria.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of Peru.

We thank Mr. Mark Lowcock for his important briefing. We have taken note with deep concern of the information provided on the humanitarian situation in Raqqa and Rukban, the populations of which — like those of eastern Ghouta, Idlib, Afrin and many other locations in the Syrian territory — face the devastating consequences of the conflict in that country on a daily basis. We must condemn the indiscriminate planting of anti-personnel mines and improvised explosive devices by Da'esh. Those heinous crimes are contrary to international humanitarian law, and have unfortunately resulted in a large number of wounded and dead in Raqqa.

We welcome the efforts being made by various countries and organizations to clear those death traps, and stress the sense of duty displayed by the humanitarian demining professionals. We also welcome the deployment of a mission of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which delivered the first analysis of the current state of the humanitarian situation in Raqqa and recommendations for action to facilitate the safe return of its inhabitants over the medium term.

The humanitarian situation in Rukban is also a source of deep concern for Peru, given the difficult living conditions to which thousands of people, mostly women and children, are exposed. Peru recognizes the legitimate right of every State to protect its borders. However, we believe that the gravity of the situation in that area requires an enormous effort to provide unfettered access, as reflected in the adoption of actions aimed at facilitating access to deliver the required assistance, in line with international humanitarian law.

It is important that all humanitarian needs in Syria be addressed consistently, wherever they arise, without discrimination on the basis of political or military interests. The politicization of humanitarian assistance is unacceptable and blatantly contrary to resolution 2401 (2018), the provisions of which, we recall, must be fully implemented throughout the Syrian territory. I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I now resume my functions as the President of the Council.

I give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): It is said that the Greek philosopher Diogenes used to walk around the city carrying a lantern in daytime. His followers asked him why he carried a lantern in broad daylight. His response always was: "I carry a lantern in daylight because it is very difficult to see the truth in daytime."

That quotation from Diogenes reminds me of some of our colleagues in the Chamber. It is as though they are carrying a microscope and trying to find a speck of dust anywhere, while disregarding the elephant that should be the focus of this and other previous meetings The elephant, of course, is the aggression initiated by permanent members of the Council against my country, the occupation of a third of my country's territory by the three countries that launched the attack, and another occupation that I will mention later. We truly need Diogenes in the Chamber.

My colleague the Deputy Permanent Representative of the United States boasted that her country's forces were able to destroy 3,000 mines in Raqqa. Her country's forces, which continue to occupy Raqqa, helped 4,000 Da'esh terrorists relocate from Raqqa first to Deir Al-Zour and then to Al-Shaddadah in the north. I believe that it would have been better for the forces of her country to call on Da'esh to surrender its maps, revealing the location of tens of thousands of mines, instead of boasting that they had eliminated 3,000 mines from the city after expelling Da'esh from it a year and a half ago. They said they had been able to destroy 3,000 mines.

Allow me to address the fact that my colleague the Deputy Ambassador of Sweden referred to the Syrian Government 16 times in his statement. He called on the Syrian Government 16 times to various ends. However, not once did he call for an end to the American occupation of part of our territories. I will hold that against him. Not once did he call for an end to the Turkish and Israeli occupation of our territories. That is also something that I will hold against him. Not once did he call for condemnation of this week's aggression directed against my country. That is also something that I will hold against him. Not once did he mention anything concerning the terrorism prevalent in Syria, sponsored by the countries that I just mentioned, and the oil-producing countries of our region. And that is another point that I will hold against him.

As for my French colleague, he referred to a great deal of information that seems to have received from Doctors Without Borders, an organization similar to the White Helmets, which was invented by British intelligence service. Doctors Without Borders is also a French invention. Apparently, that organization is present in Raqqa. It is there without the approval of the Syrian Government. Just like Da'esh, it entered Syria without the Government's approval. Doctors Without Borders can be compared to smugglers without borders, criminals without borders, opposition without borders, foreign agents without borders, aggressors without borders and terrorists without borders. It would please our French and other colleague for the intervention in the internal affairs of Syria to be without borders forever.

I have listened to the false allegations, lies and deceitful statements propagated by certain delegations regarding the visit to Douma of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Fact-finding Mission in the Syrian Arab Republic. I will share with the Council the following information. Of course, I am providing that information to please my colleague the British Ambassador because she requested a briefing within 24 hours. I shall now voluntarily provide such a briefing for her so that she will not have to wait 24 hours.

I have informed the Council before that the Syrian Government has taken all measures necessary to facilitate the arrival of the Fact-finding Mission to Syria. Today, the United Nations security team entered Douma at 3 p.m. Damascus time — 8 a.m. New York time — in order to assess the security situation on the ground. If the United Nations security team decides that the situation is safe in Douma, then the Fact-finding Mission will begin its work in Douma tomorrow. The decision to send the Fact-finding Mission to Douma was solely that of the United Nations and the OPCW. The Syrian Government has done all it could to facilitate the work of the Mission.

Furthermore, the Mission began its work upon its arrival in Damascus. Yesterday, its members listened to statements from witnesses about the alleged incident. As the Mission began its work, all these lies and rumours surfaced. They are false conclusions to distort

the Fact-finding Mission's outcome and ensure that people forget about the aggression.

Today's meeting is being held on my country's Independence Day commemorating our expulsion of the French colonial Power from Syria on this date in 1946. Unfortunately, some countries, including France and those that launched the cowardly attack on my country on 14 March, have failed to understand that the people's desire for liberty and independence is a reality, and that the days of hegemony are long past. Attempts to return to that time will not succeed regardless of the size of military fleets or the number of aeroplanes and the nice and new smart bombs. Despite the threat of force and the ongoing support for terrorism and armed groups under any pretext, the world's peoples have grown tired of the fact that influential countries continue to ignore the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations. They have grown tired of the fact that those countries completely disregard the principles of international law with impunity.

My delegation thanks the Russian Federation delegation for requesting this meeting to discuss the situation in Raqqa — that martyred city that was completely destroyed by United States forces and their alleged coalition under the pretext of combating terrorism. I will not discuss the Syrian Arab Republic's assessment of the catastrophic conditions in the city. I will only share with the Council the outcome of the United Nations assessment mission to Raqqa, submitted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates in Damascus and contained in an official note from the United Nations Resident Coordinator on 4 April:

> "Raqqa is facing a dire situation that requires a complete rebuilding and restructuring of public services and administration from the ground up."

That is a quotation from the United Nations, and not from Doctors Without Borders — or Clowns Without Borders.

Allow me to mention some of the conclusions of the mission.

First:

> "The mission witnessed the extensive destruction of the city. Every building was either partially or completely destroyed."

It does not say 70 per cent or 80 per cent. The city is completely destroyed.

Secondly:

> "The city, whose residents were estimated at about 300,000 people before the crisis, is now home to around 7,000 people at the end of the offensive by the coalition."

They managed to help 4,000 Da'esh terrorists leave the city, but that also led to an exodus of 300,000 of the city's population.

Thirdly:

> "There is a complete lack of public services: no water, no electricity, no cell phone coverage and no basic services.

Fourthly:

> "Hospitals and clinics were destroyed. Currently there is no hospital in the city, except for Doctors Without Borders."

What happened in the city of Raqqa is one example of the crimes of the so-called coalition led by the United States against Da'esh. The coalition never meant to combat terrorism, but rather to undermine the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of my country and to weaken the Syrian Arab Army and its allies in the fight against terrorist groups. The coalition's real achievement was to kill thousands of innocent civilians with the worst and most destructive weapons, including incendiary weapons. They have destroyed Syrian infrastructure, including dams, bridges, hospitals, schools, development facilities and institutions of the Syrian people, as well as their economic resources necessary for reconstruction, notably oil and gas wells, facilities and workers.

I would also like to remind the Council, for example, of the massacres against civilians in the towns of Al-Mayadin and Al-Bukamal in mid-May 2017; in Al-Sour, Al-Dablan, Al-Mayadin city, and Thibyan village in rural deir ez-Zor, towards the end of June 2017; in Tel Al-Shayer on 19 June 2017; in Al-Zayanat village on 4 July 2017; in Al-Kashkash village on 12 July 2017; in southern rural Al-Sahaka; in Al-Shafa village and Thahrat Alouni on 25 February 2018; and in Al-Bahra village on 20 February 2018.

The illegitimate coalition never meant to combat terrorism, but to place obstacles in the way of the Syrian Arab Army and its allies as they sought to combat Da'esh, the terrorist organization — for instance, the air strikes launched by coalition war planes against the

Syrian Arab Army in the Al-Tharda Mountain in deir ez-Zor on 17 September 2016. Members will recall what happened back then, as follows.

The coalition — United States — war planes were trying to provide safe passage to Da'esh terrorists between Syria and Iraq. Furthermore, on 8 February 2018, United States war planes targeted Popular Forces on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River. Those forces were fighting against armed Da'esh terrorists. The war planes killed dozens of these reserve Popular Forces.

The coalition has not only launched an aggression against the Syrian Arab Army, but it also gave support and protection to residuals of Da'esh forces by providing safe passage to its elements from Raqqa and deir ez-Zor, most of them foreign terrorist fighters. They gave them instructions to attack the forces of the Syrian Arab Army and their allies in deir ez-Zor. That is how the United States forces saved the remaining Da'esh terrorists from certain death at the hands of the Syrian Arab Army so that they could wreak havoc along the border between Syria and Iraq.

The United States, France and Britain culminated their support to armed terrorist fighters through the tripartite aggression on 14 April, with the participation of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel, as an act of revenge against the Syrian Arab Army following the defeat of the terrorist proxies of those Governments in eastern Ghoutta.

When we talk about the catastrophic humanitarian situation caused by this illegitimate coalition in the city of Raqqa, we must talk about the situation in the Al-Rukban camp. I underscore that the Syrian Government approved the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the camp in cooperation with International Committee of the Red Cross and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. However, the United States forces present in the camp prevented the delivery of that assistance and put impossible conditions for its delivery. The United States is responsible for the catastrophic humanitarian situation in the camp. We stress that the main reason for this American position is that they are using the camp to train Da'esh terrorist and other terrorist groups so that they can be used in other battles against Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and other countries in the region and the world.

In conclusion, I am talking here about the elephant that I mentioned at the beginning of my statement. The political situation in Syria is clear and does not need draft resolutions, mechanisms or semi-daily meetings under different agenda items. The situation needs the Security Council to carry out its mandate under the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations by standing against the American, Turkish and Israeli occupation of parts of my country, Syria, and standing against countries supporting terrorists groups. The Security Council also must stand against countries imposing coercive measures against the Syrian people, so that millions of Syrian people are not made refugees and internally displaced persons, as some colleagues have said. The Council must not bend to the will of the Governments of the United States, Britain and France. This is a United Nations Organization. Do not turn it into an organization that is not united. They only unite in order to violate the provisions of the Charter, invade countries, interfere in their internal affairs, try to change their Governments by force, launch one aggression after the other and destroy peoples and their civilizations.

The meeting rose at 6.40 p.m.